

First Class Innovation Begins with a Purpose

Are your innovation efforts paying the dividends that you desire and expect? If not, it is entirely possible that your starting points are driving the less than satisfactory outcomes.

Organizations today are often guilty of marshaling first class efforts for second class causes. The outcome may be success, but it is a second-rate success.

What do I mean by 'second class causes'? To begin with, I am using the noun 'cause' to denote:

Basis, ideal, belief, conviction, purpose, objective, mission, end or goal.

Your outcomes will rarely end up higher than your reach. If you begin with a second class cause (purpose), even first class efforts on the part of your personnel will yield only secondary results and miss achieving the organization's full potential.

Goal setting is an integral, but frequently overlooked aspect of innovation. When undertaking an innovation effort, do you first evaluate your real needs? Which of these truly merit committing your best resources to innovation?

Your people desire great causes. However, in most organizations they are under challenged, intellectually and emotionally. All too frequently, managers equate workload with 'challenge', but the two are clearly distinct. The onset of the latest economic downturn triggered workforce reductions increasing employee workload and damaging morale. Hardly an environment where people are motivated to learn and excel together for extraordinary results.

A positive challenge is one that inspires people to think higher, bigger and more deeply about an issue. It is the type of challenge they see as capable of producing value added results that are game changers. Namely, innovations that are worthy of their participation. People want to be part of an effort that is important and produces important results, something they can be proud of and share with others. That's human nature!

Do you have a list of worthy, first class causes for your organization? Do you think about them and continually seek to update and expand that list. Do you share it with others and solicit their input? Do you take time for review and re-evaluation to ensure that list contains only those issues that really are first class?

I worked with a client for some years whose CEO was convinced there should be lists and priorities for just about everything. Every important activity had to be prioritized as A, B or C. But soon, as EVERYTHING important had to be on the list, the A priorities

became A+, then A++ and finally A+++ and so on down the line. In the end, everything was a priority and NOTHING was a priority.

If you want to score breakthrough innovations on an ongoing basis, then challenge your people with innovation efforts that clearly target first class goals, opportunities and problem solutions. This does not mean they need be complex. Some of the greatest breakthroughs are the simplest. As to products, consider Post-It-Notes, an accidental discovery from a 3M engineer's attempt to glue up a presentation board or the humble beginnings of Velcro, the innovative result of an inquisitive mind wondering why burrs stick to a dog's coat.

Nor are first class innovation efforts limited to the design of new products. Product evolutions and line extensions, customer service, marketing, sales, production and logistics as well as processes and systems of all types are ripe with opportunity for first class innovation efforts.

First class innovation begins with defining meaningful objectives. Challenging your people with worthy causes to which they can rise is fundamental for achieving successful innovation.

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